

M-154

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 22, 1981

Forwarded to:

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New Orleans Steamboat Company
2340 International Trade Mart
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SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

M-81-34 and -35

At about 1634 c.s.t., on March 29, 1980, the U. S. Mississippi River sternwheel passenger vessel NATCHEZ with 413 passengers on board collided with the U. S. tankship EXXON BALTIMORE under the Greater New Orleans Bridge at New Orleans, Louisiana. The collision damaged the bow of the NATCHEZ considerably. The EXXON BALTIMORE was holed below and above the waterline on the portside in the port deep tank, located immediately forward of the vessel's cargo tanks. The EXXON BALTIMORE's port deep tank was flooded, which adversely affected the vessel's handling characteristics; there was no fire or pollution. Although no one was killed, two crewmembers and several passengers on the NATCHEZ suffered injuries. Damage to the two vessels was estimated at \$600,000. 1/

The accident occurred when the pilot of the NATCHEZ attempted to cross the bow of the EXXON BALTIMORE in order to execute a starboard-to-starboard meeting with the EXXON BALTIMORE when the vessels were well to port of each other. Contributing to the accident was the failure of the pilot of the NATCHEZ to establish a meeting agreement either by whistle signals or by bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone communications before altering course to effect a starboard-to-starboard meeting.

The Coast Guard operates a VTS on the lower Mississippi River from the entrance of the river to Devils Swamp light, about 7 miles above Baton Rouge. The VTC located in New Orleans receives movement reports from vessels volunteering to participate in the VTS. The data from the movement reports are entered into a computer which generates the dead reckoning position for the vessel. The projected positions generated by the computer are adjusted as vessels report their passing of certain established checkpoints along the river. When a vessel contacts the VTC on VHF radio, information on traffic projected to be in the vessel's area is recalled from the computer and provided to the vessel. The Coast Guard cautions mariners that the accuracy of reports provided by the VTC is dependent on the accuracy of reports received.

1/ For more detailed information read Marine Accident Report--"Collision of U. S. Mississippi River Steamer NATCHEZ and U. S. Tankship SS EXXON BALTIMORE, New Orleans, Louisiana, March 29, 1980." MAR-81-5

During high river stage, deep draft vessels proceeding around Algiers Point are controlled by red and green traffic lights. Shallow draft vessels, including cruise vessels such as the NATCHEZ, are not controlled by the lights. The light near Governor Nicholls Avenue controls upbound traffic at Algiers Point; the other located at Gretna controls downbound traffic. These lights operate as a part of the VTS when the river reaches 8 feet on the Carrollton Street gage on a rising stage and until it falls below 9 feet on a falling stage. The lights are operated by towermen who stand watches in the towers overlooking the river. Vessel operators can communicate with the traffic light operators on channel 67 VHF, the bridge-to-bridge radiotelephone frequency, to obtain information on traffic conditions. The traffic control lights were operating at the time of the accident.

The NATCHEZ was equipped with one multichannel VHF radio, required for bridge-to-bridge communication, which did not enable successful or adequate communication between the VTC and the NATCHEZ.

After completing the downriver portion of the cruise to Chalmette, the NATCHEZ proceeded on its customary upriver course toward the Greater New Orleans Bridge. As the vessel approached the bridge, the pilot elected to leave the east bank bridge pier to port, thus passing between the bridge and the Thalia Street Wharf. The M/V KOTAR, aided by two tugs, was approaching a berth at the Thalia Street Wharf. The pilot of that vessel did not believe there was sufficient room for the NATCHEZ to pass between his vessel and the bridge pier. He stated that he tried to contact the NATCHEZ by radiotelephone on channel 67, the bridge-to-bridge frequency; however, he did not receive a reply.

The NATCHEZ reversed course for the downriver portion of the cruise near mile 97.2 AHP. The NATCHEZ did not report the course reversal to the VTC; therefore, the VTC did not know the location of the NATCHEZ nor whether it was heading upriver or downriver. The VTC attempted to call the NATCHEZ to ascertain its position, but did not succeed since the NATCHEZ was not monitoring channel 11, the vessel traffic service frequency. If the NATCHEZ had participated fully in the VTS by reporting its course reversal, the VTC would have informed the NATCHEZ that the EXXON BALTIMORE was upbound. Advance knowledge that the NATCHEZ would be meeting this large tankship may have caused the pilot and master to consider bringing the NATCHEZ over to the east bank earlier in order to be positioned for a starboard-to-starboard meeting and may have prompted the NATCHEZ to contact the EXXON BALTIMORE by radiotelephone to obtain a timely agreement for such a passing.

The towerman at the Gretna traffic light observed the NATCHEZ as it approached and passed his position. Having received information from the towerman at the Governor Nicholls traffic light that the EXXON BALTIMORE was proceeding upriver, the towerman at the Gretna traffic light attempted to relay the information to the NATCHEZ on channel 67; the NATCHEZ did not answer. Approximately 4 minutes before the collision and after sighting the NATCHEZ, the EXXON BALTIMORE attempted to contact the NATCHEZ on channel 67, but he received no reply.

The NATCHEZ lacks adequate radiotelephone equipment to monitor the bridge-to-bridge and VTS channels simultaneously. By participating only partially in the vessel traffic system, the NATCHEZ did not receive early information regarding the location of

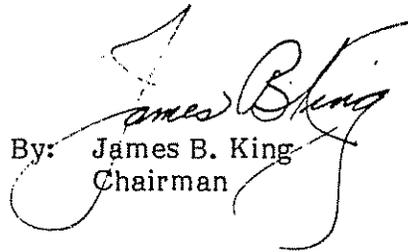
the EXXON BALTIMORE. Such information could have enabled the NATCHEZ to position itself for a proper meeting and thus avoid the collision.

As a result of its investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the New Orleans Steamboat Company:

Upgrade the VHF radiotelephone equipment on the NATCHEZ so that the navigation watch can guard the vessel traffic service channel simultaneously with the bridge-to-bridge channel. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-34)

Require that the master and pilot of the NATCHEZ participate fully in the vessel traffic system. (Class II, Priority Action) (M-81-35)

KING, Chairman, McADAMS and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in these recommendations. DRIVER, Vice Chairman, and GOLDMAN, Member, did not participate.


By: James B. King
Chairman